

Susanna Paasonen, Feona Attwood, Alan Mckee, John Mercer, and Clarissa Smith, **Objectification: On the Difference between Sex and Sexism**, London, UK: Routledge, 2020, 178 pp., \$34.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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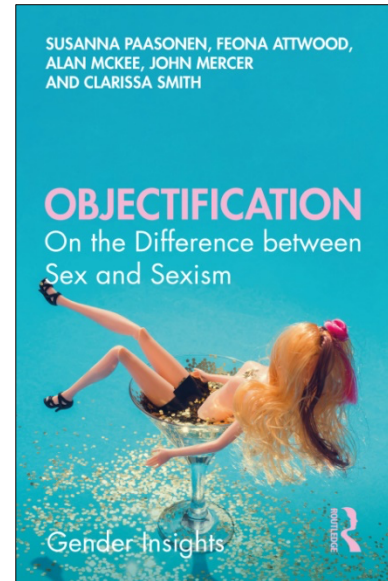
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Objectification is a long-existing and frequently recurring concept in media that is often taken as being equivalent to the sexist representation of women. Moreover, since it is usually utilized in the context of gender-based inequalities, it is sometimes confounded with other gender-related terminologies in media. With the aim of disentangling the confusion, **Objectification: On the Difference between Sex and Sexism**, by Susanna Paasonen, Feona Attwood, Alan Mckee, John Mercer, and Clarissa Smith, tries to parse out the conflated vocabularies, including sexuality and sexism, objectification and sexism, objectification and sexual depiction, by tracing the history and the application of “objectification” under a variety of situations.

Even as a term representing gender oppression, the identification of objectification is ambiguous. Academically, objectification refers to treating and dehumanizing a person as a thing, an instrument, or an object (p. 4). Moreover, objectification can be interpreted as having various meanings in different contexts, all of which blur the boundaries between objects and human subjects (p. 7). However, objectification is not necessarily about gender. Under the neoliberal contexts, people make themselves into objects and commodify their intimate relations, just as the Kardashians did (p. 6). However, the book mainly employs the feminist framework as the context of the term, in which objectification means reducing women to their physical attributes and attractiveness toward men by the mitigation of their agency.

In the first chapter, the book tries to clarify the connotation of “objectification” by presenting its appearance in several academic writings. As is informed by Nussbaum (1995), objectification is not automatically related to sexual representation. It is argued that even now there are more sexual depictions of women in media than before, but that sexist representations of women in media are seen less often. Several examples of TV series are used to demonstrate that, in the past, women acted in stereotypical roles such as wives, secretaries, or mothers. But now, women’s presence on TV is more diversified, as they are depicted holding various jobs, and are not just presented as bodies catering to male audiences. Through these arguments, the book takes its stance, which is against the equation of sexual representation with sexism.

Chapter 2 examines the gendered forms of representation, looking, and spectatorship, by traveling through its academic evolution, thus unfolding how the history of objectification evolved. This chapter starts from Berger’s (1972) and Mulvey’s (1975) research. After Berger (1972) pointed out that men look at women and women watch themselves being looked at, the term “the male gaze” was coined by Mulvey (1975) in her paper titled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in which she explores instances of



Hollywood cinema to elaborate on the three-layered male gaze theory (i.e., the male eyes of the camera, the male roles of films, and potential male audiences; p. 6). Their research results stirred a myriad of debates. As "the male gaze" became an indispensable phrase for objectification-related discussion, radical feminists proposed that women's representation in media could also generate objects and subjects, which are mutually exclusive. Consequently, activities such as the demonstration against the Miss America 1969 contest were held to protest women's depiction as the object of the male gaze.

Chapter 3 delves into the reason why sexuality has been the pillar of objectification out of all the other aspects, such as slavery or being deprived of autonomy. As is elaborated on in chapter 2, debates on the male gaze and the gendered mode of seeing have already paid attention to object-making before objectification is noticed by feminists. Then the discussion of objectification was magnified through the antipornography feminist activism. This chapter zooms in on several scholarships of radical feminism with binary views that claim that heterosexual sex is an act of possession and a symbol of male supremacy (Dworkin, 1988). Examples of "OBJECT! Women Not Sex Objects" (a UK-based feminist group) and Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist are raised to delineate how radical feminism treats gender as a biologically binary structure under patriarchal ideology, which the authors criticize for its one-sidedness.

Chapter 4 unravels the intertwined links between commercial sex and sexual agency and unveils the intricacies of subjects and objects. The authors argue that objectifying all sex workers is taking away their volition by offering the experience of Jiz Lee, a performer with sexual subjectivity. The authors also oppose the emphatic opinions that deny women's sexual agency in their careers as sex workers. By presenting various research on sexual agency, this chapter elaborates on the fact that sexual agency should be taken into consideration when discussing sex work and sex workers.

Chapter 5 explores the academic measurements of objectification by discussing several controversial theories. It is critically argued that through the lens of social psychology, pornography allegedly objectifies women and men are led to objectify women in real life for consuming it. The authors are consequently against this "hypodermic needle" model for its omission of the social and cultural background by isolating pornography as the sole contributing factor to objectification. Moreover, it is remarked that measuring objectification is tricky, as the previous academic measurements might lead to ambivalent results. Finally, the authors explore how objectification is conflated with sexualization. According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), objectification was associated with women's concerns about their physical appearances. From then on, objectification and sexualization were collapsed together.

Chapter 6 focuses on the extension of people's concern on women's representation in popular media genres. To begin with, this chapter reviews multiple explanations of "sexuality" in several reports, most of which equate sexuality with objectification. As a result, "sexualization" is left with negative and even misogynistic meanings. The authors argue that the correct response to a concern that women are seen as sexual objects is the destruction of the subject/object binary, because people are playing the role of subject and object simultaneously (p. 101). Taking Ariana Grande's music video for "7 Rings" as an example, this chapter leads to the insight that sexiness is not necessarily about male gaze or heterosexual desire. In addition, as digital media evolves, more gender-related issues are brought under the spotlight, which are elaborated on in chapter 7.

Chapter 7 tries to break the binary fabric of discussions on objectification via elements on media, including racial differences, sexual diversity, and gender variance. This chapter shed light on the viewpoint that women can display their bodies without indicating sexual availability by offering examples of Black women rappers' (including Nicky Minaj, Azealia Banks, etc.) aggressively sexual performances in their music videos. Previous research on drag shows are also reviewed, and it is suggested that critical investigations should be pursued to explore the roles the shows play in gender-related topics. The chapter then touches on the issue of trans people, especially transwomen, as their representation is somewhat "objectified." The movie *Tangerine* (Baker, 2015) is raised as an example that goes against the binary notion to probe into issues such as race, social status, gender, and sexuality.

Chapter 8, as the last part of the monograph, suggests that the either/or position is probably not an appropriate solution in understanding and discussing objectification. Moreover, it is reiterated that sexual representation or sexiness is not equivalent to sexism and they should not be conflated (p. 137). By rehabilitating sexuality as a terminology that can be deployed to examine multiple gender-related topics, the book comes to an end.

The book reveals the evolution of objectification via critical review of previous gender-related research. It critiques the mixed use of the notion by academia and media and challenges the binary object/subject framework existing in the related study. It fills in the research insufficiency by its clarification of the overlapped gender-related terms including sexuality, representation, and objectification, and thus makes it possible to develop a clear-cut identification of objectification. Moreover, although the notion of objectification in the monograph is examined under feminist critique, the authors still highlighted that objectification is not automatically about gender, foreshadowing the prospective ways of related research in other disciplines. However, despite the profound discussion of objectification, the book does not include examples of objectification emerging on social media, which would have made the overall discussion more complete and updated.

Conclusively, the value of the book lies in its clarification of objectification and its challenge of the long-existing binary view on object and subject. It leaves gender and media students, researchers, and feminists with much to contemplate.

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